

Congresswoman Betty McCollum, *AgriNews*

This September has been declared, for the first time, Farm to School Month by Minnesota Governor Mark Dayton. If you are not familiar with Farm to School programs, they connect small and mid-size farms that produce fresh, minimally processed foods with local schools to improve childhood nutrition and strengthen rural economies. Starting in 2005, Farm to School was an innovative idea being pioneered by St. Paul Public Schools. Today, it is a nationwide movement that is succeeding in getting more fresh fruits and vegetables onto students' plates.

In Minnesota, Farm to School programs are rapidly expanding. According to the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, 123 Minnesota school districts had active Farm to School programs in 2010, up from just 10 districts in 2006. These 123 districts serve 50 percent of Minnesota's K-12 student population. This September, St. Paul schools continue to their Farm to School leadership. Students in St. Paul's Highland, Groveland, and Horace Mann schools are being served watermelon, corn on the cob, zucchini, green beans, bok choy, cantaloupe and a host of other locally produced foods in the schools' new unlimited fruit and vegetable choice bars.

Encouraging children to eat fresh, locally grown, and minimally-processed foods lays the foundation for healthy eating habits in adult life, reducing the prospects of long-term chronic disease and obesity. This is clearly a priority because nearly a third of Minnesota children are overweight or obese. Farm to School initiatives are part of a comprehensive approach for addressing the obesity crisis. All of us should be concerned about how obesity is jeopardizing the health of our children and contributing to exploding health care costs for taxpayers.

These troubling trends motivated me to introduce the bipartisan National Farm to School Act last year. This legislation helps school districts across the country start Farm to School programs. This bill was included in the reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act, which provided \$40 million in federal matching funds to support local Farm to School initiatives and was signed into law by President Obama in December.

In addition to improving health, Farm to School programs strengthen local economies by expanding markets for small and mid-size farms whose products have typically been absent from the lunch trays of American students. Spending more of our food dollars locally gives a

significant boost to producers in rural America. Farm to School also strengthens communities by establishing important connections between children, farmers, parents, educators, foodservice staff and healthcare professionals.

As the 2011-12 school year begins, thousands of Minnesota children will be receiving healthier meals every day thanks to local farmers. Minnesota can show the rest of the country the healthy choices Farm to School programs offer our children.

Congresswoman Betty McCollum represents Minnesota's Fourth Congressional District. She serves on the House Appropriations and Budget Committees.